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SUBJECT: Niger: Upcoming Local Elections, Republic Day Celebration
and Pro-Tandja Rally

Ref: a) Niamey 984 b) Niamey 977

11. (U) Summary: On December 15, President Tandja launched the campaign for local elections. On December 17, he addressed the nation on the occasion of the 51st anniversary of the Proclamation of the Republic of Niger. On December 20, political parties favorable to the president's continuation in power held a rally to show support for the Sixth Republic on the eve of inclusive negotiations between the Government of Niger and the Opposition under the auspices of the ECOWAS mediator. End summary.

President Tandja Launches Campaign for Local Elections

12. (U) On December 15, President Tandja addressed the nation to launch the campaign for the December 27 local elections at the regional, municipal and communal levels. The President stated that the elections are consistent with the gradual installation of the institutions of the Sixth Republic. He also stressed that the elections would be essential to the renewal of institutions such as the High Council of Territorial Collectivities (HCCT) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (CESOC), which comprise a majority of local council members. President Tandja called for a strong voter turnout, urging citizens to, "...a general mobilization, like during the referendum and legislative (elections), in order to elect in a sovereign manner your representatives...Similar to the preceding votes, all measures have been taken...to see that these crucial elections for the consolidation of democracy take place peacefully." Opposition parties restated that they would boycott any elections based on the new constitution.

President Tandja's Republic Day Address

13. (U) On December 17, President Tandja addressed the nation on the occasion of the 51st anniversary of the Proclamation of the Republic. Key points of the president's speech follow:

-- The President mentioned that "The institutional structure of this Sixth Republic is taking shape with installation of the National Assembly and the upcoming local elections;"

-- He stated, "Several challenges still lie before us...and require that we get more organized...by opting for a new Republic, we have chosen the path of dignity and honor. However, we must be fully aware there is a price to pay, because such responsible choices require a great deal of sacrifice." He added that Nigeriens must convince themselves that Niger will only be built by Nigeriens, that it's equally important for Nigeriens to convince themselves that foreign aid is only a supplement, and not a substitute for their own efforts;

-- Referring to the conflict in the north, President Tandja said,

"little by little a peaceful path has been realized as demonstrated with the laying down of arms by different fronts that were engaged in the conflict;"

-- The President stated that, "Following the example of our defense and security forces, we need a loyal civil service that is ridden of partisan practices and the evils of corruption, where each Nigerien, appointed based on his or her competence, will strive for the sole interest of the nation...No nation is built without hard work and sacrifice;"

-- He further said that the new Constitution of August 18, 2009, specifically provides for the essential role of women and youth in the Republic and provides a privileged place for oldest institutions of the nation, namely the traditional chieftancies, which as "custodians and the embodiment of values that shape our community...deserve respect and consideration." (Note: traditional leaders, women, and youth remain key components of President Tandja's carefully built base of grassroots supporters. End note.); and

-- The President pointed out that, "The agricultural production did not totally meet expectations as attested in the agricultural and livestock survey results. Faced with such a situation, notably climatic changes, we need to work harder on production at the numerous water points across the territory...The State, as is its practice, will put in place measures to maintain cereal prices at an acceptable level for all and permit our valiant populations to live the next months without major difficulty." (Note: The notion of price controls for cereals, unfortunately, raises the specter of hoarding, parallel markets, and/or corruption. End note.)

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President's Supporters Rally

14. (U) On December 20, roughly 7,000 people under the Alliance of Forces for Democracy and the Republic (AFDR), formerly the ruling coalition, but currently made up of 25 political parties supporting "Tazarce" (the President's continuation in office), held a rally in which they renewed their support for President Tandja and expressed their determination to sustain the Sixth Republic. The new National Assembly Speaker, former Prime Minister, and ruling party MNSD President Seyni Oumarou, who spoke on behalf of the AFDR, called on "Some actors of the international community to show restraint and good judgment in assessing the situation in Niger." The rally proceeded peacefully, without violence or arrests, as had recent political gatherings (refs A and B).

ECOWAS Mediator Opens Political Dialogue Meeting

15. (U) On December 21, the ECOWAS mediator for Niger's political crisis, retired General and former Nigerian head of state Abdusalami Abubakar, opened an inclusive dialogue between the Government of Niger and members of the Opposition at Niamey's Palais des Congres. (Note: Details will follow via septel. End note.)

Comment

16. (SBU) The events of the past week occur in the context of tensions on the eve of December 22, the last day of President Tandja's second and final term under the 1999 Constitution. The political crisis continues with the Opposition and much of civil society rejecting the August 4 referendum and the newly adopted constitution, which extends the government for three years and drops presidential term limits. Although considerable political tension remains, there are hopes that the ECOWAS-sponsored mediation will provide some relief. The inclusive dialogue, which opened in the absence of main Opposition figures - Mahamadou Issoufou, Mahamane Ousmane, and Hama Amadou - who remain outside Niger despite the GON's decision to suspend legal action against them during the negotiations. While the Opposition had conceded to the GONs' demand to hold talks in Niamey, the protagonists' cut-and-dried positions on the substance remain unchanged; and observers foresee a deadlock, or perhaps long, drawn-out negotiations that serve only to buy time for President Tandja. End comment.

